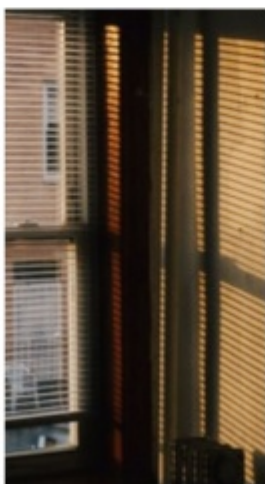


Of collars and flowers,
cardigans,
and second chances



By catharrington



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Summary:

Billy doesn't know why he turns his Camaro into a u-turn that sends his suspension squealing into the rainy night. He isn't sure why he sees a lumpy shadow hunched over on the side of a brick wall and thinks— let me stop. But he feels why. He feels it in his gut, some deep pulling thing. Feels like a red thread tied around his intestine and pulling it taught. Through his belly button and tight towards the soggy shape.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:



Billy doesn't know why he turns his Camaro into a u-turn that sends his suspension squealing into the rainy night. He isn't sure why he sees a lumpy shadow hunched over on the side of a brick wall and thinks— let me stop.

But he feels why. He feels it in his gut, some deep pulling thing. Feels like a red thread tied around his intestine and pulling it taught. Through his belly button and tight towards the soggy shape.

He's seen people like this before. Worked with them, even, just got off his job with them. They get just as dirty and make just as much money as he does. But he knows— and he's seen, the antique sort of abuse people like him get sometimes. The way some men think animals are play things.

Billy's sure if he had a pair of flicking ears on his head when he was

born, he would have gotten the same shitty treatment at home.

So in a way, he feels a sort of pity and kinship with this guy.

The figure is slouched over on his butt, his knees drawn up to keep a soaking wet blanket close to his chest. He's got on a pair of boots that are molded with wear and tear. The leather flaking off the toes. No longer waterproof. His tail is curled over and covering the laces of them. It's long, the fur would be pretty, fluffy, and a dark golden shade of brown if it wasn't dripping wet. Now, this guy's tail looked sad.

Billy walked closer. His own thick canvas work jacket getting wet, changing color from light brown to dark brown.

His boots scrape against the ground a little more than he usually would have, just so he alerts the guy to knowing he's there. And it works, he looks up from his makeshift hood.

Billy's breath catches in his throat. It's annoying, not like a film or a musical, but he feels it. The feeling that they would be singing about. Billy doesn't know too many words for it. But he can feel it. In the way his heart jumps around like someone else got their fist on it.

The guy's hair is sticking to his forehead in wet clumps. His hair and eyes are so dark they might as well be black. And his skin is the shade of piano keys ivory. Sickly, and pale, and red splotches across his cheeks means he's been crying.

Billy clears his throat. Takes his hands out of his pocket and holds them in a hopefully helping gesture.

"You look like you ain't got a place to stay tonight?" He grumbles out.

The guy blinks back at him. Huge eyes are half reflecting the glare of Billy's headlights left running a few steps behind him. The silence is loud between the rain and the rumbling engine of the Camaro. But his eyes half glowing, fully untrusting, speak volumes.

"Okay," Billy takes one hand back. Pokes it over his shoulder towards the car, the other one shoved back into his pocket. "Okay, I get it.

Ain't really the prettiest looking guy to be asking that. But I ain't about to let you freeze to death out here. So please get in the car?"

The guy's eyes him with those breathtaking narrowed eyes. His boots scuff on the ground, as if he were about to get up, but then he only grips the blanket tighter.

"Get in the car," he parrots back, a humored flight to his tone, "or what, big guy?"

Billy has to stop a light laugh on his tongue. Bites down on it. He can't believe this guy has fight left in him, but he honestly loves it. Reminds him a lot of himself, beaten down but never out. He thinks he's really mad a good call turning around in the rain to get this cat off the streets.

"Or," Billy makes eye contact, dragging the word out heavy before replying, "I'm going to pick you up and carry you to the car?" He says it with a smile at the end.

The guy's shallow breath stops short. He sucks in his lower lip to chew on. Looks between the car to Billy, once then twice. And Billy let's him, allows him the time to choose. Because not having that choice is the worst feeling in the world.

Even if the rain is soaking though his jacket.

Eventually, his boots skid again as he climbs up to his feet. The blanket dripping from his head to pool around his shoulders. His ears that were hidden, tucked away in that wet blanket, flick free. Turning left and right as they are obviously upset with the rain. They're pointy and tall, dark brown around the backs until they fade into a coffee creamer color around the middle. Baby pink inside, must be soft as silk to feel.

Billy takes a step backwards, holding up his arm to let the guy see he doesn't want anything. Just to lead him to the car.

The guy follows his lead, going around to the passengers side. When his hand gets around the cold metal handle, Billy stops him with a

knock on the roof. "Blanket, leave it there," Billy demands. Doesn't really want that leaving it's mess all over his car.

It's already bad enough with just them, Billy thinks as the guy rolls his eyes before dropping the blanket to the ground and climbing in the passengers side.

Without the blanket clutched to his chest, Billy gets a better look at the guy. He's wearing a button down flannel shirt, two layered over the other like he was at one point attempting to stay warm, and a worn leather collar.

Billys stomach swoops as he realizes just how right he was in his first suspicions of neglect. Or abuse, he doesn't know how to really qualify it. Just a couple sessions with a therapist doesn't qualify him really for pointing that shit out. Especially when he can't hardly point his own shit out.

It's not a long drive to Billy's apartment. It's in the main drag of town and usually his work doesn't take him too far out. Sometimes, but not all the times. There's plenty landscaping and lawns to mow inside the town lines.

He parks at the building, climbing out to lead the way. Tries not to pay attention or demand too much of the guy who more timidly climbs out of his side.

The building is a little large, was a warehouse that held storage for the factories around here. Buttons on one floor, spools of thread on the next. Now, it's been refurbished to affordable housing. If you don't mind the huge skylights they never changed or the cute, white mice that still linger.

Billy locks his Camaro's door with a click. Catching the cat boy's eyes with his own in a knowing flick. He leads into the locked building and up the steps. His door creaks as he pushes it open.

Even with his apartment swimming in the soft orange glow of the outside street lights, coming in through the huge windows making up the wall of his living room, the guy seems to cling to the moonlight. And cling to the cold. He's carrying himself with his hands cross over

his stomach, like if he held hard enough he could stop the shivering.

Billy grabs a pair of pajama bottoms and a hoodie from his bedroom. Lays them down on the back of the couch before taking a step backwards.

“You can change into these. They’ll keep you nice and warm,” Billy announces gently.

And the guy, is hesitant. He’s just muddy and sopping wet, smells like rainwater and mold. But he’s hesitant to rid himself of those wet clothes. At first Billy’s thinking it’s him not giving the guy enough space. But he notices that the cat’s thin fingers dance up his chest to tenderly touch across the old collar there.

Really, the look of the damn thing doesn’t match with the fondness he touches it with. His old collar had molded to his neck, turning a mean black where it once was a pale blue color. And as it shifted with his movements, Billy can see the way it marked him. Leaving a raw gash of irritation across his whole pretty throat.

The guy flinches when Billy first reaches for the collar, so he backs up. Turns on his heels for only a moment to grab one of his cotton wash cloths out the bathroom. Ran it under the hot water until it was smoking warm.

He holds it up, feels like a white flag. “Just want to get this damn thing offa ya?” He pleads.

The cat places his hand on his throat. Something longing and broken crosses his pretty face. His eyes wet with rain, hair dark almost black clinging to his forehead. He shakes his head. So Billy keeps trying. Keeps waving that flag until it’s warmth fades out.

Until it’s too much. He can’t have this guy not talking and not getting clean. Billy’s been left outside by his dead-beat father enough to know what that sickness can feel like.

So he bursts, like a dam, feels badly for it but it can’t be helped.

“Alright, I warned ya about this,” he mutters darkly, stepping up towards the mute cat.

His eyes flash black as they dilate, but Billy's already in top of him. Wraps his arms in a lock across his skinny, narrow hips and lifts. Pulls him to walk backwards to ajar bathroom door. Keeps walking backwards with the cat as he kicks and scratches at the air in front of him until his calves hit the bathtub. It's a crowded thing that's as old as the apartment. But he struggles and succeeds to lift the cat with him as he steps inside.

He's hissing at Billy, voice shivering and high pitched as he shows how scared he actually is. "You're an oaf, a fuckin ass, this is kidnapping!" He groans, torn between pleading and hissing.

Billy's not listening, he knows warm water will help them both. So, he turns on the shower. Both still in their clothes now wet with warm water.

Billy just lathers up his soap in that same cloth, makes the whole bathroom smell of sandle wood and the ocean. His favorite smells. Billy washes across the cat's upper chest, his tangled chest hair uncurling with the attention. The hissing and scratching stops instantly.

The claws clutched into Billy's meaty biceps uncurl, leaving sharp half moon cuts Billy's going to have to clean himself.

He scoffs at the guy's reaction. How easily he's gone soft with the gentle touches. "Now ain't this better than the rain, pretty cat? You smelled like a wet dog."

The other bows his head to hide his blush. "Just keep washing, kidnapper," he mutters.

Billy finally relaxes the collar off his throat. Cleans off the marks and the wounds, turns that thin throat's skin from an angry red into a blushing pink.

The two flannel shirts come off. And Billy's standing still in his work clothes. Still in his work boots. The guy in front of him is shivering under the warm water. His white tshirt completely gone transparent with the water. His pants are skinny and denim. They fight him a little as the cat steps out of them, Billy giving an encouraging nod as

he helps shivering hands over the belt buckle.

They join the flannels and the old collar as a trash pile on the bathroom floor.

With a soft sigh, an exclamation of being comfortable for the first time in a long time, the cat turns in the narrow bathtub. They stand chest to chest. And Billy watches, his hands long stilled of their moment with the wash cloth, as the cat crosses his arms over his head to yank off the wet shirt.

Let's that drop to the ground with a wet thud as well.

Those long, thin fingers Billy's only known this night but knows he'll never get them out of his head crawl timidly up his own shirt. Curls over the curve of his chest. And they lay there, content, and warm. Basking in the shower of warm water still pouring down over their heads.

He blinks softly. "My name is Steve," he says.

Billy has to take a second to remember his own name. Remember he's standing chest to chest in a shower with a naked guy he's just picked up off the street. And remembers that once in his life he would know exactly where this would be going. But by some grace, some growth like a damn cactus in the California heat, Billy manages to simply smile back. Doesn't reach his hands anywhere. Just smiles.

"Billy Hargrove," he introduces himself.

Steve's pretty ears lay back over his head in a wave of content. A quiet purr rolls out of his chest that Billy can feel rumbling through the claw foot tub under their feet.

2. Chapter 2

Coming out the bathroom, Billy held a clean pile of his own clothes up to Steve in a nearly folded, mostly crumbled stack. Steve gingerly took the hooded sweater and slipped it on first. Lifting the collar to his nose to sniff the fabric unashamed, his eyes fluttering closed while his ears folded down in interest.

Took deep, greedy breaths of Billy's scent. Then dropped the hoodie back to his chest as if content.

Billy felt himself blush across his big nose to his big ears. Almost shoved the pants into Steve's arms as he left to get another arm full of bed clothes.

The apartment isn't big, so neither is Billy's storage closet. He has one squished dusty throw pillow and one peach colored knitted blanket he'd received as a Christmas gift from Max, yet hadn't used once.

Billy's step-sister Max didn't knit— but her mother does. And her mother Susan, who had just gotten off a messy divorce with Billy's poor excuse of a father, had a lot of time on her hands to knit him a whole throw blanket.

Billy didn't hate it. Felt the peach was much more Max's color than his own. But most of all, it felt like it wasn't necessary.

She had fallen into the trap just as he had. Into the water that doesn't boil until it's up over your head. Though she didn't spend nearly the lifetime he had, she didn't get out without bruises.

A blanket wasn't near enough to fix what had happened. The years she spent allowing the pot to boil over. But it was a nice gesture.

And Billy had to admit, the peach did look good against Steve's clean skin. The light colors seems to bring out all the darker moles dotting his body. Two pokes right into his cheek, right next to each other. Like little vampire bites. Or kitten love bites. Billy wonders if they feel like much if he were to rub his thumb across them.

Steve yanks his hoodie over his head. Billy shakes those ideas out of his head.

“Night, Steve,” he says, morose for the day to be over. It felt surreal. Once he wakes, it will all be a dream.

“Sweet dreams, Billy,” Steve replies. Pulling the blanket around his hips but not quite laying across the sofa yet. His back ridged even when Billy turns to disappear into his bedroom.

He’s got no idea how sweet Billy’s dreams have gotten.

The first night that Steve stays at Billy’s he stays on the couch. Almost cowering against the cushions and using it as a vantage point to look around at everything Billy’s doing. Legs now warm and clean, wrapped in Billy’s old sweatpants, folded under him as if he were ready to leap from the cushions at any moment.

His tail pokes over the top hem of his borrowed sweats, and Billy’s not above noticing in the ways he was right about its fluffiness. Now that it’s had a chance to dry with the air, and constant annoyed flicking Billy seems to always make Steve do, it’s gotten plush. It’s fur the same shade of caramel black coffee as his hair.

And that, too, looked pretty enough to tempt Billy to run a hand though it. Steve’s hair was naturally highlighted with gold, must have been. And he grew it out just long enough for the ends to curl around the lobes of his ears.

Steve spends two nights on the couch, seemingly awake every time Billy tries to check on him. Doesn’t make any noise. Just sits with his legs tucked and his eyes surveying. As if he’s waiting to get kicked out. Waiting for the other heavy work boot to drop.

Even if he does have a pair of big boots he drops at the door every afternoon he gets off work, Billy’s not interested in telling Steve to leave anytime.

The apartment is less lonely, even if it’s only filled with a cat that doesn’t talk or trust much. And he’s not kidnapping Steve, there isn’t a rope tied round the leg of the couch. Billy’s done a lot of shit in his

life he wasn't proud of— but he would never hold someone against their will.

Steve's free to wander and explore, sort through any of Billy's clothes he wants to smell or wear. Raid the kitchen for his food. And he's free to leave any time he wants to.

If Billy came home from work to find a set of his clothes missing, and Hell, even that throw blanket missing: Billy would just be happy Steve's got it to keep him warm somewhere.

Billy's thinking— and it's a little more hope than a thought— but in his defense he's never felt this chest gripping feeling before. Never been tugged like this. He's thinking he never wanted someone to stay as much.

When he gets home from work Steve is there, tail flicking side to side in the dusty low afternoon sun. His long fingers leafing through the wooden crates of albums Billy kept in the corner of the living room. Right next to a player that had gathered a bit of dust. He usually just played the TV, hadn't been bothering to listen to records for a while.

Steve perked up when he saw him, ears facing forward abruptly. Their pretty color matched with that pretty smile sent another peach colored blush to Billy's cheeks.

"Can I play this?" He asked instead of saying 'welcome home', and the impersonality of it fit him so much better. Fit them so much better.

"Sure," Billy shrugged off his jacket, took off his boots, and stepped through the door to a recorded audience clapping along to steady drumming. It took him a second before he recognized it as Fleetwood Mac. Really it was another gift, another stored thing he hadn't ever used.

"Oh really, this?" He almost shivered as he came up to the table the player was set on. Standing behind Steve to watch over his shoulder.

"Hope you don't mind? The plastic was still on it," Steve pointed out mated of factly, "I've always liked this band. Never listened to them

much, though.” He added sadly.

Billy lifted one rough from work hand up to pet along Steve’s head, threading his fingers into soft hair. Nudging his fingertips against his ears that suddenly went from perky to twisted, folded down. Billy nudged them to try and get that happiness back.

“It’s a live version. My sister got it for me, but, never really was a huge fan of her girly stuff.” And that tension in Steve’s body melted into an annoyed huff. His body settling back against Billy’s wider chest.

Billy turned his face so his nose tickled right into the ends of Steve’s hair. Where they curled at their longest. The strands of gold that smelled like his shampoo the cat was borrowing. “I’d like to listen to it with you?” He blew out his words just to watch that hair rustle.

“Let’s,” Steve purrs as he settles back.

They share the small space as the sun goes down. As the sunlight fades back to the artificial orange glow. As the vinyl circle scratches to announce the end of it’s spinning.

As their bowls to the remedial dinner Billy was able to whip up for them two sit empty in the sink.

He stands and stretches, feeling his well used joints click into place. Some worse than others if he’s been unlucky enough to have gotten an injury back in high school.

Billy turns to Steve, eying the way he’s already gotten into the middle of the couch. Peach blanket gathered over his lap. Ready for his little announcement.

Billy frowns at the familiarity of it. Wishes Steve would trust him after two days.

His lazy smile falters, he hopes he doesn’t look too much like his father as he shoots Steve a worried furrowed brow.

“Hey, if you need anything my doors right here, okay? Don’t worry about waking me up, I’m a light sleeper.” He orders with a steady

voice.

And Billy didn't explain why he's a light sleeper. He just nodded at Steve's two pretty dinner plate big brown eyes as they blinked nervously back at him. His ears folded down in seriousness.

Billy wanted nothing more than to feel the softness of that hair between his ears again. Wanted to leave his hand on it like a claim. Wanted to dip his nose into it and never take it out. Even if Steve's ears flicked in annoyance at him, tickling his nose, he would still love to sleep right there.

Billy scoffed under his breath as he went to sleep alone.

But that night. The third night, was when Steve finally decided to crawl hand over hand into bed with him. On top of the plush comforter while Billy laid half-way under it.

Steve's eyes were far too pretty in the moonlight to be fair. Billy couldn't pretend to be sleeping, he watched open mouthed as the cat boy got comfortable in the space left empty in his bed. Just a couple breaths away. Billy could see stars and constellations in his eyes, in the delicate moles painted across his skin. In the multi-colored strands of hair towards the pink middle of his ears; some white, chocolate, or mocha.

Billy doesn't feel like it's real. He almost flinches when Steve uses the soft tip of one finger to trace across his shoulder.

Realizes it ain't quite a dream, this is real.

Billy's shirtless in bed, naked from the blanket pooled at his navel up. He realizes that Steve's pointing at the scratches his cat nails left from the bath. The 'kidnapping' as he had called it.

"These are mine," he whispers in a rolling purr, "I scratched you and hurt you. When you were just helping me." And he sounds sad, his starry eyes filling with moisture.

Billy shakes his head, laughs out a puttering noise from his thick chest. Smiles a little too cocky and a little lopsided at Steve. "Nah," he drags gruffly, "nothin' I wasn't asking for carrying you like that."

Steve believes him, his face going serene again on the soft bedsheets. A smile that's trying to be like Billy's but can no where near reach the level of sleet turning up his pretty lips. Starry eyes flick from Billy's face back to his shoulder.

He doesn't ask before he leans forward to press a soft, gentle, almost whisper of a kiss into the cut skin. One on each little half crescent left by Steve's own nails.

When he's done he leans back and tries for that smile again.

And Billy knows that. Had worn that smile as fragile as glass many times. When he's all broken up inside and begging someone not to shatter him more. Not to put more cracks in his stained glass window life.

Asking without words if that's okay, if he's okay. If he's good enough to be kept.

Billy's brows furrow at the idea of Steve ever being considered not good enough.

He reaches out one sleep heavy hand to rub ghost soft circles over the bones in the back of Steve's hands. Not holding, not really touching, just reassuring. He grumbles out his words that he hopes reaches Steve down in the darkest part of his moonlight bright cat.

"Apology accepted, pretty cat."

Steve's purr increases to his whole chest. Happiness filling the bed that was half empty just a night ago.

He turns his face back towards the empty pillow. Burrows his face into it so just his mess of brown hair and tall ears can be seen. They flick in annoyance just as his tail does. Or, maybe, Billy dreams it could be nervousness.

"You're still a kidnapper," Steve mutters.

And they laugh gently from both their aching chests.

3. Chapter 3

Billy stepped into one of the dingy diners of their city, not the best one by far, but surely his favorite. He knows if he sits down at his favorite corner booth the waitress on duty won't even have to ask, she'll just bring over two greasy eggs and a cup of black coffee. Maybe with a couple packs of sugar on the side if he's feeling particularly sweet that day.

And the thing is, he was feeling sweet that day. So his whole body gave a surge of happiness at the little pile of packets next to his cup, both precariously balanced on one plate while the waitress brought out his eggs on another one.

With her two hands filled, she set them down with a grace that didn't match her messy bun or stained apron. But at the same time: it really did match her messy bun and stained apron.

"Here's your order, sweetheart," she said, gracefully setting the plate with a clack on the glossy table.

Billy looped his finger through the handle of the coffee cup. Loving the feel of the hot to the touch porcelain mug along his work worn index finger. He pulled it close enough for the steam to blow up into his beard hair.

This was the only place that served breakfast all day on the way home. Sometimes Billy stopped by just to really confuse his body with breakfast at the wrong time. Create a new new. And visit old friends.

"Thanks, Susan," he exhaled. His breath moving around the trail of steam, but not strong enough to stop it.

She stood up straight over him, laying her hands on her hips and cocking one to the side. "Billy," she said with a chide, "haven't seen you in so long I forgot your face," and her lips unturned in a fond way.

Billy's eyes flicked to her as he was ripping open the bright pink

packets of sugar to pour into his coffee. He gave a cockeyed side nod, dumping the sugar and taking a drink before it even had time to dissolve.

“What’s wrong?” She asked abruptly.

And that made Billy roll his eyes. “Think something’s gotta be wrong for me not to come by and get this greasy mess?”

“Yes,” she insisted. Hips still jutting to one side.

“Don’t be such a mom—,”

“I am your mom,” she snapped back. With no furry, no hurry, just a solid knowing that came from years of unknowing.

The cup of coffee settles back down to the table with a thunk. He glances up at her. “Susan,” he sighs out, “you’re really not my mom anymore?”

This time it’s her turn to roll her eyes. Moves her whole head with it, just like her daughter Max does. It’s so familiar. Reminds Billy of his house growing up, his whole life. Where the only good moments were few and far between and usually filled with a head of messy red curls. “Doesn’t have to be legal, I’m still your mom.”

Susan relaxes into herself. Turning softer and gentler, exactly how she used to be when walking around their old house like a blind mouse. She sits down opposite Billy, reaches forward as if to take his hand— but instead let’s it hover just an inch away. Let’s the concept hang if he chooses to accept it. They both know he won’t. But it’s the thought that counts.

“What’s wrong?” She asks again.

Billy shakes his head, let’s loose a little sigh, because he knows he’s been defeated. Knows when her crystal green eyes focus on something they don’t let go. When Susan decided to grow a backbone it really stuck. And now Billy’s stuck with a tiny 2 person family who actually gives a damn.

He took another drink of his coffee. Looked around the surrounding

diners a few times to make sure no one was very close. Before he set the cup back down. Looking at his eggs, he said as casually as possible, "I've got this guy I like."

The look of worry over Susan's face melted instantly. Her glossy lips quit worrying so hard against her teeth and instead spread in a smile. "Wow," she exhaled, "that's so fantastic, Billy! What's his name?"

"You've always been this nosy, Susie? Or are you some kinda lonely bird now?" Billy laughed out the side of his mouth, turning down to the plate again.

His fork scraping across his plate didn't cover the sound of her scoffing. "Maybe I am," she settled into her seat a little. Lifted her hand so her chin rested on her balled fist. "Maybe I'm empty nesting."

Billy cut into the egg on his plate. Slicing the yoke until it made a harsh trail of bright yellow through the middle. Moving around the grease and the pepper grounds.

Around them the diner was alive with noise. She should really be getting back to waiting tables. Bringing more dishes out filled with food balanced gracefully on her thin arms. Rushing to keep coffee cups filled to the brim as she does it all.

But all Susan keeps doing is keep looking at Billy. With those wide green eyes through her sparse ginger eyelashes that have a coating of black mascara on them. She seems to fade out as she watches him. A soft grin tugging on the side of her glossy lips as she thinks about something. Something, while looking at him, makes her smile.

For Billy it's a lot to process.

"His name is Steve," Billy admits shortly. Doesn't look at her when he says it so he doesn't have to see the way her eyes light up.

"Steve," she tries the name out.

Billy shoves his fork into the middle of his other egg. Spins it around so the whole thing twists and turns into a ball, then lifts it to eat in a single bite. A glob of neon colored yoke grips onto his bottom lip.

Dripping until it disappears into his scruffy beard hair.

Susan would usually be picking on him to trim it up. Telling Billy that it makes him come across an awful lot like a cave man. Now, though, she dreamily asks: “what’s he like?”

Billy let’s out a scoffing sound himself, taking a napkin to clean his lips and beard. Then he takes a drink from his coffee and mulls over his answer. Thinks of Steve curled up under Billy’s bed sheets waiting back in Billy’s apartment.

“He’s,” Billy struggles to start, “he’s perfect.”

Susan levels him with a bored glare. She wanted more than one word, obviously.

With Billy’s plate of eggs empty now and his coffee down to a couple of sips, she eyes him as if she knew that he knew that she would not get up and refill his mug until she got more words.

“He’s,” Billy started again, plucking the words out of air. They felt stiff and foreign on his lips as he made them. “He’s nice, I guess you could say. Not really though, ‘cause he’s a bit of an asshole just like me. Doesn’t trust too well or talk that much but...,” Billy paused.

Tilting his coffee cup to the side so he could see the grounds on the bottom cling desperately to the porcelain. Bits of his sugar that hasn’t dissolved fully into the liquid.

“Got a sense of humor like a whip. Lights up a whole room when he lets you see his smile. Steve—,” Billy shakes his head. Sets his cup down with a click. Doesn’t take his fingers off the rim so he can keep petting it absentmindedly. “He... he makes me think about words like ‘soft’. And ‘warm’. And ‘home’.”

Susan’s eyes are so bright and green and happy, it’s hard to not see them out of the corner of his vision.

“And?” She asks abruptly.

Billy stops his fingers. “And what?”

“What’s he look like!” Susan giggles, “Is he handsome?”

And that, that makes Billy’s cheeks flush. His annoyance tilting over to a rose tinted glow of embarrassment. He gapes for a couple seconds trying to make all the words swirling around his head fall into a single file line.

“Steve looks,” he starts desperately, “Steve’s perfect. He’s like the cover of a magazine. Don’t really know why he’s settling for me.”

Susan rakes her nails across the table as she finally pushes herself to get up. Her hair has shaken a little more loose, has to take a couple tries to keep some of her red curls behind her ear. And she makes a couple short adjustments to her peach colored uniform. Straightening the tortoise shell buttons that were never out of place.

Before she can open her mouth, Billy lifts one hand to point off the top of his head. Susan leveled him with a curious expression before he explained, “he’s a half cat,” Billy explains.

“Ahh,” Susan draws the sound out. Makes a flush grow up Billy’s neck into his beard hair. “When am I gonna meet this perfect Steve?” She asks.

Billy’s lifts up his coffee mug, trying to hide his embarrassment with a flirty smile. “When am I going to get a refill?” He quips back.

And the diner keeps serving its breakfast menu all day long. Billy stays sitting just long enough for the sun to set in the windows around him. Their clear glass over looking the street painted with water colors until they belonged better in a museum. Yellows and oranges and red, mixing together with a spatula, before purpling out to darkness at the very end. Closer to a bruise than a painting. Billy knew a lot more about pressing cool packs to bruised and broken skin than wandering around museums.

He left the largest tip his pocket would allow, and shuffled out to the dingy sidewalks. Slides back into his Camaro and drives until he’s pulling into his apartments parking lot. It was a quick drive but it felt so, so long.

Staying away from Steve always felt like it was too long.

When he finally opened the door he was met with the same scene he's started to become spoilt to. Steve busying himself in the apartment one way or the other while waiting for Billy. That set of amazingly fluffy ears snapping to attention with the opening of the door. Anything in Steve's hands left hanging as he turns and smiles in welcoming.

Billy wishes he could keep this feeling on loop. Bottle it and wear it around his neck in a locket. Drink it like straight liquor into his veins.

Instead, today, he's too tired. He slinks into the apartment and pulls off his boots as he always has.

The living room is swimming with another vinyl record scratching. Well not another, the same one. Steve's seemed to have taking a liking for it. And it makes Billy's whole chest swell thinking they have something of a soundtrack to their routine.

"You're late," Steve says as he turns back to his book, but his ears laying flat against his head and the way his tail is fiercely hitting against the couch means he isn't giving the pages his full focus.

Billy can feel those honey brown eyes digging into him from their corners as he sheds his jacket. As he steps out of the hallway and into the living room. As he walks around to the back of the couch. As he leans over the back to rest his weight on his crossed arms.

As he lets the tips of his work worn fingers trail across the stiff tips of Steve's ears.

"Yeah, Sorry," he breaths out quietly. "Stopped to visit family."

What small amount of comfort Billy's petting had given, that word seemed to take away. His breath catching and holding in his chest as if trying to hide away.

They listened as Stevie Nicks sang a few lines, her voice low and steady, a constant of words in all that lays unspoken between them. "Hope it was nice," Steve turned his head slightly as he spoke. Pressing one ear into the palm of Billy's hand, laying his head softly

into the touch.

“It was,” Billy ran his hands through Steve’s hair greedy-like. Desperate for the soft fur on his skin.

He didn’t realize how his eyes became unfocused and glazed over until Steve’s fingers wrapped around his arm. Stopping it’s motion with an abrupt, iron hard grip.

Steve brought Billy’s hand closer to his nose. Giving it a short nuzzle with the pointy tip of his nose, he screwed his face up in a playful displeasure. “You smell like breakfast foods. Gross and greasy.”

Billy flicked his eyes up to see Steve’s mischievous smile, matching it with his own sleepy one. “Caught red handed.”

He leaned forwards a bit. Over the back of the couch as it not so kindly pressed into his ribs. His chest was sore from working and his body reeked of sweat and yard soil. But he didn’t care. Not when Steve was this close. Not when he was smelling his scent so close and intimately. Billy’s thicker wrist wrapped around by Steve’s slender fingers. Delicate like flower stems, yet strong enough to hold the weight of all his beautiful petals.

Billy felt just like a bee. Coming to sit and rest, trying to survive on what nectar Steve could, would give.

Billy leaned forwards to press his own nose into the space between Steve’s ears. Burrows his tip in as far as it can go, yet his nose doesn’t touch scalp in the mess of long chocolate colored hair and fur. He smells deep and needy.

And he can finally feel along the sides of his cheeks how Steve’s ears finally come back up from the sour mood that was pinning them to his head. The achievement of that, of making Steve feel happier, sat in Billy’s gut hot and sticky as warm honey.

“So this means you’re going to cook breakfast for dinner?” Steve asked in a whisper.

Billy laughed into his hair. Giving into one more second of heaven before he backs away. Stands back up.

“Sure, breakfast for dinner. Only ‘cause you begged so nicely,” Billy rolls his eyes in agreement.

Steve jumps from the couch, over the side so his body heat brushes across Billy in the best of ways. He lands gracefully on his feet. Doesn’t bother to straighten out the pair of cut off sweat pants he’s taken from the bottom of Billy’s sleepwear drawer. But Billy isn’t about to complain how the frayed, cut off edges show off Steve’s sculpted thighs.

Burnt bacon fills the apartment for the rest of the night. Billy makes the attempt to cook, yet he never said he was good at it.

When they go to sleep that night they curl a little closer to the other. Billy’s body fresh from his shower. Washing off the day of work before he lays down on the cotton sheets that seem to trap the yellow sunshine smell of Steve’s fur.

Their hands are close to each other. Wrapped in the blankets shared between them but not touching.

Billy tries to sleep but his head is swimming round and round with all he wants to say. All he wants to ask. His fingers twitch with the thought of it. It’s unbearable. So he finally settles for a middle ground.

“Next time, I can take you with me,” his words are soft whispers. His breath smells like mint as it rushes out to flutter the hair falling over Steve’s forehead.

The question of if he was talking about the family visit or the better choice at unburnt food goes unspoken.

Steve smiles as if he doesn’t need the words spoken. As if he already knows what Billy means to ask, as if he had always known. As if he could smell and sense all the bad things as they float through Billy’s head. Just with the flick of those pretty ears. And answer them as if they didn’t scare him at all.

“Mmm,” he hums lightly. “I want two eggs: scrambled, side of bacon and sausage links, extra hash-browns, and toast with grape jelly.”

Billy couldn't stop the rolling laughter as it filled the quiet room, warming them in the middle of the night. "You're going to get fat!" He laughs.

"Good," Steve bites back.

In the darkness his eyes open slowly, leveling Billy with a half-lidded stare. His eyes were shimmering golden as citrine stones as they picked up the sparse light around them. Reflecting that light back to Billy. Making him weak to it.

Billy doesn't even work his tired throat around the words 'I'll never leave you' they feel like far too much too soon. Instead, he says it with a press of his fingers to Steve's forearm. Urging him to stay right there for as long as he'll let him keep.

And then as if contented, Steve's eyes flutter closed again.